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ABSTRACT

Written for and by principals, the guide provides a framework for developing school policies which encourage partnership with the parents of handicapped children. The first two sections focus on the principal's role in family impact analysis and characteristics of families with handicapped children as they relate to the school. The next section gives principles of policy development (such as using a team approach and respecting confidentiality), and suggests a multiactivity project to identify policy needs through talking with parents and teachers, reviewing and analyzing existing written policies, and gathering information about the special education family population. Half of the guide consists of five checklists to use in developing school policy. These include a principal checklist (a list of general guidelines concerning the principal's role); school policy checklist (questions grouped in categories); teacher checklist (list of questions to ask teachers about their concerns and practices); family checklist (possible discussion questions for parents regarding their relationship with the school); and family data questionnaire (to obtain information on types of families in the special education program). (DB)

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# TAKING A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

**A principal's guide for working with families of handicapped children**

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**Susan C. Farkas**
**Director, Special Education Projects**
**Family Impact Seminar**
**Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc.**

Family Impact Seminar, a program of the Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc., was established in 1976 to test the feasibility of assessing the impact of public policies on families. This guide is adapted from a method of analyzing public policy in terms of families, developed and extensively field tested nationwide by the Seminar.

**Family Impact Seminar Members:**
Walter Allen, Nancy Amidei, Mary Jo Bane, Terrel Bell, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Wilbur Cohen, Beverly Crabtree, William Daniel, Jr., John Demos, Patricia Fleming, Robert Hill, Nicholas Hobbs, A. Sidney Johnson, III, Jerome Kagan, Sheila Kamerman, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Luis Laosa, Robert Leik, Salvador Minuchin, Robert Mnookin, Martha Phillips, Chester Pierce, Isabel Sawhill, Carol Stack.

**Family Impact Seminar Staff:**
A. Sidney Johnson, III, Director; Theodora Ooms, Deputy Director; Ruth Hubbell, Director of Research and Policy Studies; Susan Farkas, Director of Special Education Projects; Susan Brown, Associate Director for Policy Projects; Elizabeth Bode, Director of Publications; Darlene Craddock, Ed Metz and Connie Rice, Administrative Staff.

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# Introduction

## Goals:

*Taking a Family Perspective: A Principal's Guide for Working With Families of Handicapped Children* is a guide for looking at school policies from a family perspective. Developed for—and by—principals, its main purposes are to help you:

- understand how your school's policies are affecting families;
- identify policies which are insensitive to families and inadvertently may be barriers to home/school collaboration;
- develop policies in your school which encourage partnership with families;
- identify district and state policies which adversely affect families in your school.

As you read the guide there are two things we'd like you to consider. First, the focus is specific, but the concepts and methods are applicable to all families. Second, although the guide is written for principals, it can be used by parents, teachers, teacher trainers, special education directors and advocates.

## Contents:

We first discuss in "Considering Your Role" the principal's role in implementing special education policies and promoting school/family collaboration, and how family impact analysis can help. Then in "Thinking About Families," after discussing families today in general, we consider what having a handicapped child means to a family and issues related to their part in home/school collaboration and some of the difficulties they face. In "Planning an Approach" we suggest ways to use the checklists of questions in the following section and detail a sample project.

Next, in "Looking at Your School" we provide five checklists to help you evaluate school policies in terms of their impact on families and consider what the impacts are where family circumstances differ.

Finally, in "Resources" we include materials used in the preparation of this guide and other selected resources.

## Definitions:

**School policies**, as we use the term, refers to written policies *and* practices and includes the activities needed to implement policies. Thus Public Law 94-142 is a policy, state and district special education guidelines are policies, and school handbooks contain policies. Additionally, hours of school, the ways meetings are conducted, school programs, and standard operating procedures are all policies.

**Handicapped children** refers to children in your school participating in or in need of special education services. These children may be mentally retarded, hard of hearing, deaf, orthopedically impaired, other health impaired, speech impaired, visually handicapped, seriously emotionally disturbed, or children with specific learning disabilities.

**Family** by our definition refers to two or more people related by blood, marriage or adoption who are living together or apart. This means that a child's family includes mother, father, brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and any other relative who plays (or would like to play) a key role in the life of the handicapped child. For separated or divorced families this includes the parent who is not living with the child. Family also refers to people who act in the role of the family, but may not be related, such as foster parents, stepparents or informal adoptive parents.

# Considering Your Role

Elementary school principals have traditionally recognized the important part parents play in the education of their children both in school and out. As a principal, your role has long been one of establishing an environment where children and their families can best take advantage of what the school has to offer. Now state and federal legislation concerning the education of handicapped children requires you to involve parents in new ways.

In 1975, Congress recognized the critical role of families in the education of their handicapped children in passing the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) which requires that parents be active participants in the educational planning and decision-making for their handicapped children; now every state has similar policies. Nationwide, parents are to be members of the school team that decides their child's educational goals and objectives, services required, and placement which are written into an Individual Education Program (IEP).

Federal, state and local education policies can set up a structure for collaboration, but what makes the structure work—what makes the difference for families—is you, the local school principal, and your staff on "the front lines" who must implement these policies day to day.

To learn about the impact of these special education policies on families we asked principals, teachers and parents for their views. We learned that even when school staff and family members are committed to working together, there are many communication problems and serious practical difficulties that interfere with this commitment.

Typical of the comments from principals were these:

. . . . PL 94-142 demands time that principals don't have. For example, the IEP meeting has to be set up at a time convenient to parents. So a teacher could come to the principal with a time that the meeting is set up which disrupts the principal's plans.

. . . . I see people in the teaching profession who find it difficult to accept some parents because of the parents' background, attitudes, or the fact that the parents don't agree with the administrators.

. . . . It all depends on the school's relationship with the community. We have a long-standing supportive relationship with our community. My teachers and I live around here. We don't find it hard to work with our parents.

In another school, classroom and resource teachers had this to say:

. . . . A partnership. Sure I believe in partnership. But try to get the parents to come to a meeting. I try so hard to talk to them. There are things I'm doing in class that I know they aren't doing at home. It's taking twice as long to get anywhere. If they would only care enough to come in.

. . . . I would like to talk more with parents, but when do I have the time? Many of my parents work during the day, and at night I have my own family to worry about.

. . . . My problem is I have this boy in my class who is really having problems. His parents are divorced, and he goes to his dad's house on the weekend. I really would like to call his dad, but his mother said she has custody and I am not allowed to call him.

Even in an exemplary special education program we found there were difficulties. Parents at one yearly evaluation meeting expressed the following:

. . . . I feel dependent, I don't know what's best. I have to have total trust in you (the staff). It bothers me not to be able to make a judgment.

. . . . I felt I had very little input in the decision-making. I came here knowing you have the expertise. I sort of went along. A lot of times I really thought you were wrong. There really isn't decision-making power for parents. The institutions have the decision-making power.

. . . . I feel a burden of having to do all these activities at home. I feel I am not doing enough.

. . . . You tell us she's doing great, and everything is wonderful—then the evaluation shows she's only progressed three months in the last six months! I think you are trying to encourage us because you think we'll abandon our child. You don't think there are things we'll do just because she's our daughter and we love her.

Advocacy groups are helping families understand and exercise their legal rights regarding the complicated due process provisions of the law. States and school districts are informing school personnel of their responsibilities regarding the technical aspects of compliance. The demands on principals from both sides are intense. Unfortunately an adversarial relationship often results between schools and families. We found there are few tools available for principals to help them minimize these conflicts and design policies in their own schools, which foster home/school collaboration.

## What is Family Impact Analysis?

We believe there is an essential first step you can take in order to design policies that are sensitive to families. This first step is to understand how your school policies currently affect families, and how these policies may affect various types of families differently. We call this process family impact analysis. For example, how do policies for IEP meetings affect a working parent who has difficulty attending meetings during the day, a non-English speaking parent who does not understand communication by phone regarding the meetings, or a parent who feels so alienated from school in general that he won't even try to attend?

Often there are unintended as well as intended effects of the most well-meaning of policies. For example, at an IEP meeting many professionals may assemble with the intention of giving parents comprehensive information, but this may so overwhelm the parents that they feel inadequate to contribute at all. To discover these unintended effects you must observe the policy in actual practice and ask the families themselves. As one principal put it, "We need to go through a process that will give us information so we can work out a plan for our own school."

## General Family Impact Questions

Perhaps the best way to convey a sense of how family impact analysis works is to list the kinds of questions it encourages. Our experience suggests that there are basic family impact questions that can be asked about almost any school policy, program or practice affecting families. For the most part the five checklists we provide in this guide are based on these general questions:

1. How is family defined in programming for children?
2. Do families have real opportunities to participate in the school decisions that affect them and their children?
3. Within the context of the school, is a family allowed to choose among a range of available services and placements? Are real choices available?
4. How is the role family members play in contributing to and alleviating a child's problems taken into account?
5. Is the family's role in helping and teaching their child encouraged and supported?
6. Is a family's experience of their child sought and used in adapting the classroom, the curriculum or the methods?
7. Are important family ties like extended families and kinship, including those living outside the household, acknowledged or ignored?
8. Is there sensitivity to family background—is consideration given to values and practices of families from varied racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds?

# Thinking About Families

## Families Today

We are seeing dramatic changes in the structure and lifestyle of families. The so-called traditional family with two parents, mother at home, father working, and children exists only in one out of six families with children at home. Especially noteworthy in terms of home/school relationships are the increase in single parents, women in the labor force, and families with young children in which both parents work.

Nineteen percent of all families with children living at home have one parent. But this doesn't tell the whole story. Because of the high divorce rate coupled with the high remarriage rate, it is estimated that of the children born in 1978, forty-five percent will live in a single parent household at some point in their childhood. This means that nearly half the children in every classroom will have this experience. Single parent households are most often headed by mothers (there is a small increase in single father households); however, fathers living apart from their children are also single parents and often still keep in contact with their children, many opting for joint custody.

Today the majority of mothers are working—sixty-two percent of all mothers with school age children and fifty-two percent of those whose youngest child is age three to five. Eight million households with school age children are two worker families. Although there is as yet little reliable data on families with handicapped children concerning the above trends, we would expect the figures to be comparable for these families.

When we evaluate school policies it is essential to consider what the impacts are where family circumstances differ. Families differ significantly in their ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds and economic situations. A single school may have black, white, and Hispanic families represented. They may be low, upper and middle income; Catholic, Jewish and Protestant. With this diversity, there is a wide range of family values, hopes and dreams. Even in our mobile society, extended family, informal kinship, and community networks still play an important part in the day-to-day lives of family members. An example of how knowledge about cultural background of families applies to home/school collaboration is the following. In certain Indian cultures the paternal grandfather makes all important family decisions. Also, in Hispanic families the father's role is much stronger. School staff aware of these cultural traditions and desirous of family cooperation would make every effort to ask parents to include the paternal grandfather or father in a school conference or IEP process.

## Families with Handicapped Children

As with all children, a handicapped child's most important asset is the support and nurturance of his or her family. Adults handicapped from childhood report that their parents were the most important influence in helping them adjust. Having a handicapped child has a profound impact on the entire family. A handicapped child, just as any child does, brings joy and pleasure. At the same time there are additional stresses. In the words of a mother who had to give up a nursing career to care for her multiply handicapped preschool daughter, "It has impacted my whole lifestyle. I thought parent-

hood was something you could do and still do other things. I didn't expect parenting a special needs child to be like this." Even when the handicap is less severe, such as an emotional disturbance or learning disability, parents and other family members experience embarassing disruptions in social situations and must constantly be alert for ways to smooth the way for their child and family. Also when the condition is mild, parents may maintain the hope that the problem is only a phase that will pass. (This hope is often fueled by relatives, friends and their private physicians.) Unfortunately, this may cause the school staff to view them as denying, defensive and even uncaring.

Examples of some of the practical difficulties families may face include such things as having to drive great distances to clinics and doctors' offices weekly, not being able to get a babysitter or take a vacation without the child, having to spend long hours in hospitals often watching their child undergoing painful therapies or surgeries, and dealing with annoyed fellow patrons when their child is disruptive in a restaurant. Taking care of the needs of their handicapped child while at the same time holding a job and trying to take care of the rest of the family is a major source of stress for parents. Some types of families, such as single parent families, teenage parents, poor families or those without extended family or friendship networks, may find it even more difficult to cope than other kinds of families.

Brothers and sisters often have additional responsibilities in caring for their handicapped sibling at home and at school. In an extreme example, a sixth grader who attended the same school as her younger brother confined to a wheelchair was required to assist him in going to the bathroom during the school day as a prerequisite for the school's providing services to him (though this was illegal). At home and in the community brothers and sisters share in family responsibilities for a handicapped sibling often from a very young age.

The label retarded, blind, behavior disorder, learning disability or deaf says very little about a specific child. Each family's experience is different; professionals too often forget that parents are the best source of information about their child. They may not be able to explain in textbook terms their child's developmental levels and problems, but they can tell you what their child can do and what their child is like at home and in other settings outside of school. On the other hand, there are many parents who have become experts on their child's condition and can also serve in that capacity. Formal evaluations and programming decisions of children to be most useful should include the specific and rich information families have to offer. The knowledge of parents and the knowledge of professionals are *both* important to assure optimal education for each child.

Parents may have difficulty at first with this type of collaboration. Some may feel alienated and intimidated based on their personal experiences growing up. For others, dealing with the school on these issues is a constant reminder of how different their child is and forces them to give up longstanding expectations about their child's future (expectations that may have been formed long before their child was even born). Parents' own self-image is on the line in their dealings with the school. Still other parents may have difficulty due to lack of experience and skills. School staff can help parents by recognizing these sensitivities. They can let parents know they are valued in their own right, and help them develop competencies. Also teachers can have a powerful impact on parent self-esteem by showing they like and accept their child.

In order to be decision-makers parents need information. For example, many parents are unfamiliar with their due process rights, terms such as mainstreaming, and are unaware of the alternative choices. In addition to parent training activities, your school library could be a valuable resource for parents in gaining such information.

In order to design policies that help families, and that promote home/school collaboration, it is vital that you and your teachers get a feeling for what families deal with in having a handicapped child—what a particular child is like in a particular family. Depending on the number of special education students in your school, you may not be able to get to know all the families well. You can, however, get to know a few to give you a sense of what families face. You can encourage your teachers to get to know children in their family settings. And you can let families know you are interested in them and their problems in a very personal way. At the same time it is very important to consider how teachers may be affected by these measures.

## Families of Handicapped Children and Teachers

Public Law 94-142 has been a major source of stress for teachers. In talking about the stress they feel, teachers cite their additional responsibilities regarding developing individual education programs, mainstreaming handi-

capped children, consulting with others serving the family, and conducting parent conferences. Even teachers who wholeheartedly believe that a partnership with parents is necessary and advisable, may feel that the law is working against them. As one overwhelmed teacher said, "They have all the rights, we have all the work and responsibility." The support of the school principal is the key to whether teachers can work out a collaborative relationship.

When it comes to providing all the services a child needs, teachers are often caught in the middle, being the closest person to the child and the family. They know what services the child needs, what the family needs, yet they may be under pressure if their school doesn't feel it can provide for such services. Many teachers feel that they can't say what services are really needed for a particular child because they might lose their jobs. Additionally, teachers may fear personal contractual liability regarding IEP's. They need to be reassured that the IEP is not a performance contract which can be held against a teacher if the handicapped child doesn't meet objectives.

Reaching out to families requires patience, skill and time. Often teachers find that in order to have meaningful contact they must accommodate themselves to the schedules of family members. This means they must meet or have phone conversations outside school hours—at times that may infringe on their personal time or time with their own families. Rarely are teachers compensated formally for this time. It is a great challenge to principals to develop policies which encourage communication with families while being sensitive to teachers' needs as well.

To summarize, it may be difficult to encourage and support the notion of shared responsibility with parents since this is a new role for teachers (as well as for parents). As a principal you are in the delicate position of having to be aware of the concerns of both teachers and parents regarding their relationships with each other and assuring that school policies help them develop the needed partnership. They need someone who truly understands how hard it is at times. When it comes right down to it, you are the one most responsible for creating an atmosphere where parents and teachers feel comfortable about learning from each other.

# Planning An Approach

In this section we present a process—guiding principles and activities—which we believe will go a long way toward solving the problems principals, teachers and parents of handicapped children face in working out mutually beneficial relationships.

A key step is to ask questions about what is going on. The next section, "Looking at your School," contains checklists of guidelines and questions. We strongly caution you to use them carefully and sensitively. While they can be extremely helpful, if used insensitively they can be intrusive. They can make people feel you care or they can make people feel you are accusing. Also, at the risk of belaboring the obvious, it is worth underscoring the point that if you ask questions you must be prepared to listen to what people are saying.

In many important ways the process you go through to select questions and find answers is as significant as the answers themselves in promoting home/school partnerships. That is why we put this section first.

## Principles

We have learned that the following six principles are essential in getting into the complex issues concerning families. We urge you to consider them very carefully before using the checklists in the next section.

### Use A Team Approach

Whenever possible, in any project you undertake form a small task force or advisory panel. Try to include representatives of the people who will be advocating and implementing any changes suggested. By doing this you build in future success. For small projects this would mean including at least parents, teachers, and you, the principal. For a larger project you might consider including a district supervisor or school board member. Choose people who give your group diversity without introducing overwhelming conflict that will hinder your progress. The key to successful home/school relationships is a feeling of mutual trust and understanding. The team approach can help build this trust.

### Focus Your Project

Use the checklists to help you identify priorities. Start small! For example, focus your questions on parent-teacher conferences, or evaluation procedures, or written communication home. If you don't focus your project, you risk it getting too complicated and too time consuming.

### Consider Values

It is very important for your task force members to discuss their own attitudes and values regarding the roles of parents and schools generally, and about parents of handicapped children being partners with school staff in decision-making for their children. You and your task force will be asking parents and teachers about these issues and reviewing procedures in your school in terms of how they facilitate this partnership. Therefore, you need to get clear about your own philosophy and values on these issues first.

### Respect Confidentiality

Parents and teachers (and principals) must be assured that their comments will not be held against them or go in their files. If you should request information in writing (for example on the Family Data Questionnaire), give people the option of leaving off their name and use pre-addressed envelopes in which you ask people to send information to you.

### Look At How Policies Operate

Your policy review, in addition to analyzing written policies,

should always include information about how policies actually operate. Observe them in action. Ask the actors themselves about the effects. For example, walk through the entire IEP process from evaluation through placement with a family and talk to the family members, teachers and others involved.

### Develop Policy-Oriented Recommendations

Focus your recommendations on policy rather than outcomes. For example, recommending that teachers should make home visits is hollow without such enabling policies as providing time for teachers to go on such visits, substitutes for the teachers when they are away, and incentives for teachers to go on visits after hours. You may also have to advocate for change in school board or union policies if they turn out to be a barrier to such visits.

## Activities

The tools in the next section are the Principal Checklist, School Policy Checklist, the Teacher Checklist, Family Checklist and Family Data Questionnaire.

The materials contain a wide range of suggestions and questions which may serve as the framework for looking at your school policies and operation. They are not exhaustive lists. Rather, they are meant to alert you to possible issues to focus on. Questions from the checklists or entire checklists can be used in a variety of ways. You can:

- hold group discussions with parents, teachers, PTA's, or advisory boards;
- review selected written policies and operating procedures in your school;
- include questions in on-going program evaluations;
- collect information about the types of families in your school by using the Family Data Questionnaire;
- convene informal forums to hear from interested citizens and officials.

## A Multiactivity Project

The activities described above can be done individually, or you may decide to combine several into a longer term project.

Below we describe one approach which would take a relatively short time—one month to three months—with little or no money and would produce specific recommendations for policies in your own school. You may discover that to remedy a situation in your school, policies at the district or even state level need to be changed. In that case the study will help you target those policies in order to advocate for change. The project basically involves talking with parents and teachers, reviewing and analyzing written policies, and gathering information about the special education family population.

### 1. Getting Started

**Task Force** - Form a task force consisting of at least a parent or parents, a teacher, and you. Distribute this guide for them to read before your initial meeting.

**Initial Meeting** - At your meeting review "principles" on page 7 and "general family impact questions" on page 3 . Then go over the checklists to identify priorities. There are directions on the checklists for doing this. Choose a focus and begin to plan activities.

**Values** - At your initial meeting or at a followup meeting, discuss the value issues involved in the topic you have chosen to pursue. Going over the general family impact questions will help bring out the issues. Although it is hard and sometimes confusing, try to understand where you stand on the issues and see where there are differences in your group. This will help you understand the values expressed in the responses of parents and teachers and the values underlying current policy.

### 2. Gathering Background Information

**Family Data** - The Family Data Questionnaire will give you an overview of the types of special education families in your school. It will help you identify areas of particular need; for example, if there is a large number of single parent families. You might ask a secretary, volunteer, or parent (or task force member) to gather information from each family using the Family Data Questionnaire and then compile the information. Phone interviews or mail are other ways to collect this information.

**Written Policies** - From your policy manuals and guidelines gather and review the policies related to your focus, for example, on parent-teacher conferences. As you read the policies ask yourself, "What are the intended and possible effects on families?" There may be policies you need to review other than those directly related to special education. You may need to look at policies regarding school hours, substitute teachers or union contracts, if you discover that a major barrier to school/family collaboration is teacher schedules. A member (or members) of your task force should conduct these activities.

### 3. Holding Group Discussions

Hold discussion groups with parents and teachers—either separately or together—to get their views on how policies are working.

It is important to develop discussion guides for the meetings. This is a list of topics to be covered, written in question form. To develop your discussion guide, first go through the checklists and make a list of the issues you would like to cover. For example: How do parents feel about IEP meetings? Are parents involved in the decision-making process? How do the work schedules of parents affect their ability to participate in meetings?

Keep your list of issues as short as possible so that you can focus on issues in depth. Next to each issue write down whether this issue can be addressed by asking questions of families or teachers or both. For example, both parents and teachers should be asked about the issue of parents being involved in decision-making. From your list of issues develop separate discussion guides for families and for teachers. Distribute these guides as the agenda for the meetings.

At the group discussion assign a task force member the task of writing what is said. Save time at the end of the meeting to have this person summarize the discussion to obtain a concensus about what was said.

### 4. Analyzing the Information

**Organization** - As a result of the discussions and review of policies, you will have written material to analyze. A good way to organize information related to your discussion questions is to compile the responses to a given question. Once this is done your task force can review the responses in order to summarize the information.

**Conclusions** - From the summaries you can develop a list of conclusions. For example, if many parents mentioned problems with understanding evaluation procedures, you might conclude that communication regarding evaluation procedures is a problem.

### 5. Developing Recommendations

From the conclusions you can develop specific recommendations regarding policies in your school. In the example above, a recommendation might be that a staff member should call parents before they receive written notification about evaluation procedures to explain and answer questions.

### 6. Writing Plan for Action

For each recommendation develop a plan for how it will be implemented. In the example above, the plan might be deciding which staff member will call parents, at what hour of the day, and what should be said. Since this is a very sensitive time for parents, you may decide to provide in-service training regarding such communication. You may include this action in the school policy manual. Also, if you identify changes that need to be made in district or state policies, your plan should outline how you will bring this to the attention of the policymakers involved. You will no doubt think of other ways to organize and follow up on the information you obtain. We strongly recommend limiting yourself to a few recommendations and specific plans, seeing how these go, and then deciding if you want to tackle other areas.

### 7. Disseminating the Results

Once the plan has been developed by the task force take it to the teachers and parents (and community where applicable) for approval. This can be done in the form of a short report or informal presentation at a meeting. All people who participated in the discussions or provided information should know the results of the project. Going back to the issue of trust mentioned above, it is essential that people know that they are listened to. In this way you tangibly demonstrate you care.

# Looking At Your School

This section contains five checklists for considering school policy from the perspective of families of handicapped children. The checklists focus on matters which can be addressed by school policies. For example, family disorganization and stress are not directly school policy issues while times meetings are held and who attends IEP sessions are. Considerations regarding family stress as it impinges on a child's learning might, however, lead you to recommend that counseling services be provided as part of the IEP. Similarly, the recognition of family stress might lead you to measures such as reminder phone calls before IEP meetings. The goal is to identify policies which are barriers to effective home/school partnerships as well as policies which are currently helpful and should be continued.

As we stressed in the last section, it is very important to focus your activities. Therefore, each instrument has space provided to check off areas to focus on. The checklists are:

- **Principal Checklist** is a list of general guidelines concerning your role as principal. They have been identified by other principals, teachers, parents and scholars as ways principals can establish cooperative home/school relationships with families of handicapped children. Space is provided for checking off items you are already doing and those you would like to follow up on.

- **School Policy Checklist** contains questions about school policy grouped in categories. It would be impossible and unwise to attempt answering all questions. Therefore, the checklist is presented in a format to help you select priorities for focus in your school. There are nine categories of questions. Next to each category is space to rank the item on a priority scale.

- **Teacher Checklist** is a list of possible questions you can ask teachers to learn about their concerns and their current practices regarding families of handicapped children. The checklist can be used in a variety of ways. You might decide to ask a few teachers questions individually or use some of the questions as the basis for discussion at a staff meeting. You can preselect questions yourself. Or you can distribute the checklist at a group meeting and use selecting questions as a consciousness-raising activity to lead into the discussion. Space is provided for checking off questions to focus on.

- **Family Checklist** contains possible discussion questions for parents regarding their relationship with the school. As with the Teacher Checklist you can preselect questions or use the checklist as a consciousness-raising activity with the group. Most schools have found group discussions preferable to individual interviews.

Space is provided for checking off questions to focus on.

• **Family Data Questionnaire** is a short questionnaire for parents designed to give you information about the different kinds of families receiving special education services in your school. Several of the questions reflect recent changes in parent responsibilities that may affect traditional school/family relationships and parent involvement in decision-making.

The questionnaire will help you identify particular needs in your school. For example, if you find that there is a large proportion of single parent families, you may want to know how policies are particularly affecting them. The questionnaire also helps you identify the various categories of people you would want to include in any task forces, group discussions, individual interviews, surveys, etc. in order to get a complete answer to questions of family impact.

You can modify the questionnaire for your particular school by adding or deleting categories. For example you might add a category for ethnic, racial and socio-economic background or delete the "other agencies" category.

The questionnaire can be distributed at a parent group discussion, filled out in telephone interviews or mailed home. If mailed, a cover letter should explain the purpose of the questionnaire and how you plan to use the information. In the letter tell parents that they do not have to include their names, but may do so if they wish. A preaddressed return envelope will assure confidentiality (and increase your return rate).

# Principal Checklist

**Directions:** The following are guidelines for principals concerning working with families of handicapped children. Next to each item check if you are already doing this and/or if you want to follow-up on it.

| I am doing this | I want to follow up on this | |
|---|---|---|
| _____ | _____ | 1. Have a written statement of your school's philosophy regarding the education of handicapped children and your relationship with families. Distribute this to parents and teachers. |
| _____ | _____ | 2. Make sure parents know whom to talk to with concerns about their child's education. Let them know they can come to you directly with their concerns. Develop an informal complaint process which you monitor. |
| _____ | _____ | 3. Let teachers know explicitly that you value their working with families. |
| _____ | _____ | 4. Be available to teachers so they can voice concerns, fears and frustrations in working with handicapped children and their families. |
| _____ | _____ | 5. Let parents know you accept their handicapped child as much as other children in the school. |
| _____ | _____ | 6. Participate in parent involvement activities and provide a model for your staff. |
| _____ | _____ | 7. Observe parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings to see if and how family members actually participate in decision-making. |
| _____ | _____ | 8. Establish a relationship with local advocacy groups such as the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities and Association for Retarded Children. Use them as a resource for parents and staff. |
| _____ | _____ | 9. Help parents realistically evaluate mainstream possibilities for their child. Help them look at how the school can benefit their child and what the drawbacks may be. |
| _____ | _____ | 10. When you consider, propose and implement policies, stop and ask, how will this affect families? And how will it affect different kinds of families differently? |

## School Policy Checklist

**Directions:** In the following checklist the questions regard your school's policies and practices. Next to each category of questions is a column to rank the item as to how much of a priority it is for you. Read all questions in a category. Then think, is this an area we need to work on in our school? How much of a priority is it—low, medium, high or somewhere in between? Fill in the column up to your priority point. If the item has no priority leave the column blank. A medium priority would look like this:

After you have gone through the checklist, plot your responses on the graph below for a visual picture of your relative priorities so that you can identify areas to focus on. *Note:* there is space on the checklists for you to fill in your own questions or categories.

**Directions:** Place a large dot on the vertical line for each category at the corresponding priority point. Then connect the dots.

High
Medium
Low ☐

### 1. Family Decision-making

- How are parents made aware of their rights and responsibilities in making —not merely approving—school decisions?
- Do parents have the skills to participate in decision-making for their children?
- Is parent training available at school or by other organizations in co-operation with your school? Has it been effective?
- Are teachers trained in strategies which involve parents as active decision-makers?
- Where there are alternatives, can parents choose their child's teachers?
- Are there ways for parents to get a clear picture of the array of placements possible? Can they visit classrooms to evaluate the setting in terms of their child's needs?
- Can parents observe their child's program in the classroom?
- Do parents feel they contribute to the decision-making process?

High
Medium
Low ☐

### 2. Written Communication

- Are letters, notices and reports written in a personal, non-threatening, jargon-free language?
- Can parents understand them?
- Are communications written in other languages for non-English speaking families?

High
Medium
Low ☐

### 3. Evaluations

- How are parents made an integral part of the evaluation process?
- Are parents asked about their child's strengths and weaknesses?
- Are home visits allowed or encouraged as part of the evaluation process?
- Is a teacher or some other person assigned the task of learning about how the child functions at home?
- How are evaluation procedures and results explained to families?
- Are families given the information they need in order to make decisions? Are parents explicitly told how their child is functioning in comparison to other children the same age? Are parents informed about what to expect for their child's future?

High
Medium
Low

### 4. IEP Meetings and Parent-Teacher Conferences

- Are meetings held at times mutually convenient for families and staff?
- Can parents attend without taking off from work? Can they bring small children if necessary?
- What school policies help flexible scheduling? What policies are barriers? (For example, union policies regarding teacher work schedules.)
- Do schools reach out to fathers as well as mothers?
- Are other family members encouraged to attend where appropriate?
- Are parents familiar with special education terms used at meetings, such as "mainstreaming" and "related services"?
- Are parents provided with an agenda for the meeting and a list of questions for them to consider before the conference?
- Do parents feel comfortable at conferences and meetings? Do they know everyone's name? Are name tags provided where needed?
- At meetings, does someone formally or informally assume the role of parent advocate encouraging active parent participation, directing questions to parents, reinforcing comments and requesting clarification?
- Are realistic tasks for a family to work on at home included in the IEP?
- Are a family's adjustment and training needs included in the IEP?
- Are parents given opportunities to consult other (outside) professionals if they wish?
- Are non-custodial parents encouraged to participate and/or informed of results? Do they receive a copy of the IEP?

High
Medium
Low

### 5. Record-keeping

- What record-keeping policies help or hinder in gathering information about the types of families in your school?
- Is family information routinely requested about students? Is this information analyzed? If so by whom? To whom is this information made available? Is it used?

High
Medium
Low

### 6. Informal Communication

- Do school policies encourage teachers to reach out to families in informal phone contacts, notes, etc.? Is there time during the day for teachers to call parents at home or work?
- Are teachers encouraged to call families when things are going well?
- Can teachers be rewarded or compensated for consultation time spent with parents outside of school hours?
- Are teachers encouraged to find out what skills parents are working on at home?

High
Medium
Low ☐

### 7. Parent-to-Parent Relationships

- Does the school provide activities for families to get together to share mutual concerns and learn from each other?
- Does the school provide activities for families to get together just for fun? Do families of handicapped children feel a part of the total parent group?
- Does the school provide ways for parents of handicapped children to informally discuss their child with parents of nonhandicapped children in the class?
- Does the school provide activities for parents to get together for specific training? (For example, regarding PL 94-142 provisions, behavior management techniques, or communication skills?)

High
Medium
Low ☐

### 8. Coordination with Other Agencies

- Do school policies allow you to take a leadership role in coordinating services with other agencies and professionals involved with particular families?
- Is there a case manager—a counselor, social worker, teacher or parent liaison—who is clearly designated to coordinate with other agencies?
- Do written policies define coordination and consultation with other professionals as part of the teacher's role?
- Do teachers have time to consult with other professionals during business hours?
- Do you have a written or informal relationship with administrators of other agencies?

High
Medium
Low ☐

### 9. Libraries and Resource Materials

- Does your school library or office have reading materials for parents concerning handicapping conditions, family adjustment, decision-making, and education rights and responsibilities? Does the school or PTA budget allow for this?
- Does your library contain books about handicapped children, and with handicapped people as characters?
- Are all families made aware of these materials through announcements? Newsletters? PTA announcements?
- Is there an effort to explain programs for handicapped children to all parents and children?

### Other Categories

## Teacher Checklist

**Directions:** The following are possible questions for teachers about their concerns regarding working with the families of handicapped children. Check off questions that you would like to discuss or know more about. There is space provided for your own questions.

| Want to discuss or know more about | |
|---|---|
| _____ | 1. What are your feelings about mainstreaming? |
| _____ | 2. In your opinion, to what extent should parents help make decisions about their child's placement and school program? |
| _____ | 3. What are your main concerns regarding working with families? |
| _____ | 4. Do you feel involving families creates additional stress for you? If so, how? How has involving families helped you? |
| _____ | 5. Do you feel you have the training necessary for working closely with families? What do you feel you need? |
| _____ | 6. Have you had training in how to encourage parent participation in parent-teacher conferences? In how to include parents in decision-making at IEP conferences? Would you like this? |
| _____ | 7. Are there ways for you to learn about children in their homes? Do you feel the school encourages this? |
| _____ | 8. Do you have enough time during school hours to devote to families? What problems do evening meetings and phone calls create for your own family? |
| _____ | 9. Do you feel you should be compensated for time spent outside school hours communicating and working with families? If so, given the school's financial and other constraints, what creative suggestions do you have for such compensation? |
| _____ | 10. Do you talk with others at school about your feelings regarding working with handicapped children and their families? Are there formal activities for this? Would you like this? |
| _____ | 11. Is there someone in the school available to discuss issues regarding particular families? Would you like this? What other supports do you feel you need for working cooperatively with families? |
| _____ | 12. Do you call or write notes home to share successful experiences? How has this worked out? |

**Want to discuss or know more about**

_____ **13. How do you encourage families to help you adapt the classroom for their child based on their experience at home and in the community?**

_____ **14. Have you asked parents to help you solve educational and behavior problems?**

_____ **15. Are you made to feel that you are totally responsible for children's achievement and adjustment and when things aren't progressing that it's all your fault? Or are you made to feel this is a shared responsibility with families? Who makes you feel this way?**

_____ **16. Do you feel that parents appreciate your efforts? Do you feel the school does?**

# Family Checklist

**Directions:** The following are possible questions for families of handicapped children about their concerns in working with the school. Check off questions you would like to discuss or know more about. There is space provided for your own questions.

| Want to discuss or know more about | |
|---|---|
| _____ | 1. What are your feelings about your child being with nonhandicapped children as much as possible in school? |
| _____ | 2. In your opinion, to what extent should parents be involved in making decisions about their child's placement and school program? |
| _____ | 3. Do you feel you really help make decisions about your child's special education program and services? Explain. |
| _____ | 4. Do you feel that being involved in IEP conferences and other decision-making activities creates additional stress for you? In what ways? |
| _____ | 5. Do you feel you have the training necessary to participate in decision-making for your child? What training would you like? |
| _____ | 6. Do you feel you have the information necessary for making decisions about your child? What information would you like? |
| _____ | 7. Are there other family members that you would like to be involved in planning for your child—for example, grandparents or an aunt who babysits regularly? |
| _____ | 8. Who at home plays an important role in your child's life? Who else does the school need to get to know in order to best serve your child? |
| _____ | 9. (For separated or divorced families) Who can and should the school involve in decision-making? In school activities? In sending progress reports? Can the school involve your ex-husband/wife? |
| _____ | 10. Do you have any special problems with attending meetings because of work, other activities, or responsibilities to your other children? What are they? |
| _____ | 11. What are your main concerns regarding working with teachers and school staff? What would help you work more effectively with them? |
| _____ | 12. If you have a problem concerning the school, whom do you go to? Are you able to iron out differences before they become major problems? |
| _____ | 13. What about the other children in your family. Do they have special responsibilities at home related to their handicapped brother or sister? How have they adjusted to having a handicapped child in the family? |

**Want to discuss or know more about**

_____ **14.** How have brothers and sisters adjusted to having their handicapped sibling at their school? Do they have any special responsibilities at school? How does your handicapped child feel about it?

_____ **15.** Do you call or write notes to your child's teachers about things happening at home that might be affecting your child's work at school? Do you feel comfortable about doing this?

_____ **16.** Do you talk to your child's teachers about ways to help or teach your child that you have learned from everyday experiences? Do you feel you are working cooperatively with the teachers in this area?

_____ **17.** Do you feel teachers recognize your responsibility for your child's adjustment and achievement?

_____ **18.** How has having your child in the school affected your family?

_____ **19.** Do you feel there is good coordination between the school and other agencies and professionals serving your child? What problems do you have with this? How could the school be more helpful?

_____ **20.** What can the school do that would be helpful to your family?

# Family Data Questionnaire

**Directions:** The following will help the school in planning for children receiving special education services and their families. Please check the appropriate boxes or fill in the blanks to describe your family.

**1. Household** (Check all boxes that describe the household of your child receiving special education services.)

- ☐ single parent (mother)
- ☐ single parent (father)
- ☐ two-parent first marriage
- ☐ two-parent not first marriage for one or both spouses
- ☐ foster parents
- ☐ guardian: describe _____
- ☐ brothers and sisters, grades _____
- ☐ other relatives living in the household _____
- ☐ non-relatives living in household _____

**2. For separated or divorced families, the parent not living with the child:**

- ☐ is not involved with the child.
- ☐ maintains a regular relationship with the child.
- ☐ is involved in making decisions about the child's education.
- ☐ would like to be involved in the following ways: (check all boxes that apply)
  - ☐ by receiving report cards and records.
  - ☐ by receiving invitations to school events.
  - ☐ in IEP decision-making.
  - ☐ by helping out on field trips and school activities.

Comments _____

**3. Availability for Meetings**

- ☐ A parent or guardian is at home during the day.
- ☐ A parent or guardian is home part-time during the day. When _____
- ☐ Both parents/single parent or guardian are/is working outside the home full-time during the day.
- ☐ I (we) prefer meetings during the day.
- ☐ I (we) prefer meetings at night.

Comments _____

**4. Transportation**

- ☐ It is easy for me (us) to get to school during the day for meetings, etc.
- ☐ It is difficult for me (us) to get to school during the day for meetings. Describe _____

_____

_____

**5. Extended Family**

☐ We have relatives living in town who have a close relationship with our family (other than those living in our household). They are: (give relationship not names): _____

_____

_____

☐ We have no other family members living in town.

**6. Other Agencies**

☐ Our family and/or our child in special education is receiving services from other agencies. Describe (include private physicians if for more than check-ups): _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

**(Optional)**

**Name** _____

**Child(ren) in the school's special education program; age** _____ **sex** _____

**Comments** _____

_____

# Resources

Closer Look. P.O. Box 1492, Washington, D.C. 20013. Free materials are available for parents of handicapped, youth professionals, advocates and students, including fact sheets and newsletters.

*The Exceptional Parent.* 262 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02116 An excellent magazine for parents with down-to-earth articles, many of them written by parents.

Family Impact Seminar. Members of the staff are available to speak with you by phone concerning your projects, unfortunately we cannot accept collect calls. (202) 822-8722 We also welcome reports of your results.

Featherstone, Helen. *A Difference in the Family.* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980. Addressed to parents of severely disabled children, this book describes how the lives of families are affected by having a disabled child.

Gliedman, John, and Roth, William. *The Unexpected Minority, Handicapped Children in America.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.

Kroth, Roger L., and Scholl, Geraldine T. *Getting Schools Involved with Parents.* Reston, Virginia: Council For Exceptional Children, 1978. (Eric Clearinghouse product.)

Moore, Coralee, and Morton, Kathryn. *A Reader's Guide for Parents of Children with Mental, Physical or Emotional Disabilities.* Available from Bureau of Community Health Services, Health Services Administration, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857. DHEW Publication No. (HSA) 79-5290.

Turnbull, Ann P., and Strickland, Bonnie. "Parents and the Educational System." In *Understanding and Working with Parents,* edited by J. L. Paul. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1981. The authors present a model for involving parents in IEP conferences. They suggest giving parents a list of questions to be thinking about before the conference such as:

- What skills would you most like your child to learn?
- Are there concerns about your child's functioning at home that could be addressed by work at school?
- What aspects of your child's behavior do you believe need to be improved?
- What do you believe to be your child's strengths and weaknesses?
- What methods have you found to be effective in rewarding and punishing your child?
- To what extent does your child interact with children in the neighborhood?
- What are your feelings about providing opportunities for your child to interact with nonhandicapped children?

Turnbull, Ann P., and Turnbull, H. Rutherford III. *Parents Speak Out, Views From the Other Side of the Two-Way Mirror.* Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1978. Written by professionals who are also parents of handicapped children, this book gives deep insight into the problems families face.

# The Institute For Educational Leadership, Inc.

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